

The Camilo Ayala Brothers: Lost Treasures of the Art World

The paintings of the three brothers -- Marcial Camilo, Juan Camilo, and Felix Camilo Ayala -- stand among the high points of modern Mexican folk art, and represent the most ambitious creations to have come from the province of Guerrero . The joyous traditions of Guerrero rival the better-known outputs of Oaxaca or Michoacan in quality but they have not received comparable attention from collectors or museums.

The state of Guerrero lies between Mexico City and Acapulco and includes the cities of Taxco , Iguala, and Acapulco . Of particular importance is the indigenous Nahua community in the state of Guerrero. The local Nahuas live in a series of villages along the Rio Balsas, dating prior to the Spanish conquest. San Agustin Oapan, with approximately 1500 citizens, is the largest of these villages, and the entire local Nahua community numbers no more than 40,000 individuals. Yet they have evolved a unique culture, as reflected in their distinctive artistic traditions.

Nahuas can be found in several parts of Mexico but the Rio Balsas community has been isolated for a long time. It is protected by the mountains and by the absence of any very large city in the immediate area. (There are two paths to San Agustin. One is to take the road up from Xalitla, which is about fifteen minutes from the city of Iguala . The other is an unmarked turn-off from the Mexico City-Cuernavaca highway, just before the Puente Mezcala.)

I first discovered the brothers when I was visiting the late Haitian art dealer and author, Selden Rodman. Rodman owned a number of fine pictures by the brothers, but he was not keen to sell them to me. Since that visit, I have been tracking down the works.

After buying some works from dealers, I decided to take a trip to San Agustin, using a Mexico City taxi driver. I asked in the village for the brothers, and found that only Juan Camilo was at home. I drove to Juan's house, spoke to him, left him some money for paintings, and told him I would be back within a year.

The following year I tracked down Marcial Camilo in Taxco , as Juan had told me Marcial now spends most of his time outside the village. I went to the central square of Taxco and asked the local artisans if they knew where I could find Marcial.

Fortunately I stumbled upon Marcial's daughter, Oliva, selling pots in the central square, and she directed me straight to him. As I asked her if she knew a Marcial Camilo Ayala, I recognized her similarity to a portrait that Marcial had painted of her many years ago, which now hangs in my living room. She was embarrassed to hear that I look at her portrait every evening at home.

To this day, only about half of the road to San Agustin is paved. A journey of no more than twelve kilometers takes several hours, and potentially more in the rainy season. Most Nahuas in the area do not read and write much and they have Spanish as a second language, if they speak it at all. Juan Camilo claims that no one in the town speaks English or has migrated to the United States . San Agustin has no stores to speak of and most residents do not have television or radio.

The local religion is Catholic, though heavily infused with animistic elements, which are manifest in the numerous local festivals.

The landscape around San Agustin is beautiful, similar to many parts of the American Southwest, though wilder in feel. The river, Rio Balsas, is central to life and plays a prominent role in many of the artworks. Residents bathe in the river, fish in the river, wash their clothes in the river, and conduct their social lives in the river.

The local painting started with pottery. For as long as records exist, Rio Balsas artisans painted a variety of designs on pots, which were then shipped out and sold. In the early 1960s, however, Rio Balsas artisans switched to painting on amate. Amate is made on a bark paper, originally coming from a small village near Puebla. Amate paintings were cheaper to transport and suffered no breakage. The idea of painting on amate came from Max Kerlow, a folk art dealer in Mexico City who introduced the idea to some Nahua artisans. Amate painting rapidly took off and a new genre was born.

Amate painting developed in two directions. First, some amate creations are highly original works of art and are sold to relatively exclusive buyers. Many of these amate works are detailed black and white sketches, rather than colored works. Far more common, however, is the second branch of amate painting, which is largely for tourists. This kind of amate is sold on the streets and in the artisan markets of many Mexican cities and in Olivera Street in Los Angeles. Themes tend to be highly generic and the artistic quality is usually no better than satisfactory.

Low and high quality amate nonetheless share a common iconography. The most frequent topics are village scenes, local religious festivals, and weddings. These pictures draw upon the San Agustin landscape of river, cactus, wild animals, and vivid stars. Some of the more sharply drawn high quality works resemble older Arabic miniatures in style. One branch of amate portrays animals, usually birds, with twisting, sinuous lines and sharp, vivid colors. The village scenes use a vertical form of perspective, as is found in nineteenth century Japanese prints. Black and white amate drawings frequently portray nativity scenes in great detail. In more recent times, amate has been used as a form of political protest (more on this below).

Virtually everyone in San Agustin and neighboring villages learns how to draw and paint at a very young age. A typical lifestyle involves tilling the fields during the rainy season (late summer through fall) and otherwise turning to artisan work to make a living. In earlier times San Agustin had been a center for the salt trade, but when that source of income dried up, earlier in this century, artisanship became more important.

The Ayala brothers started as amate painters in San Augustin but were encouraged by outside patrons to try larger scale works. In the 1972 an American, Edmond Rabkin, was in Cuernavaca with his wife, the artist Carolyn Mae Lassiter. Rabkin accidentally encountered Marcial in the streets and found his presence and his personality compelling. He bought all of the amate that Marcial was carrying and the two quickly established a friendship. Rabkin encouraged Marcial to paint on a larger scale, and the idea spread to Marcial's brothers, Juan Camilo and Felix Camilo, and to several of their cousins, Felix Jimenez Chino, Inocencio Chino, and Roberto Mauricio.

While these individuals were starting to paint, and also in later years, Rabkin offered generous support.

The group soon proved to have a remarkable talent for painting. Marcial has always been the leader, the most conceptual, and the most original. His paintings draw upon sources as diverse as surrealism and Diego Rivera, but are always rooted in native Nahua traditions. Marcial once noted that: "Painting is my way of looking into my past, my people's past..."

His pictures have a deep, mysterious quality and often concern dreams or multiple perspectives on a single event. As much as any mainstream artist, Marcial's work shows imagination to be a vital method of philosophical presentation, a way of recapturing deep ideas about a collective past. Marcial's pictures have been exhibited in the United States several times, including in the permanent collection of the Museum for International Folk Art in Santa Fe , and he is usually considered the most talented of the group. Marcial also has two paintings in the new Museum of the American Indian, the newly opened Smithsonian museum. The accompanying video display features him talking about amate painting. He is charismatic, articulate, and worldly.

Juan Camilo is more conservative, sticking closer to the amate tradition, but he has painted some of the loveliest of the Ayala pictures. A vertical landscape, with Nahua festivals in the foreground and stars in the sky, is his signature style. Some of his most accomplished paintings rely primarily on shades of black and grey, with only occasional splashes of color. Juan is quieter than Marcial and spends more of his time in San Agustin.

Many of Juan's paintings reflect the animistic religion of the local Nahuas. The sun, moon, stars, and animals are all portrayed with a god-like presence. In some pictures, birds and foxes sit high in the trees. Men are more base. They have mastered the earth, in the form of pottery, but they can only aspire to godliness by killing these animals with bows and arrows, or by honoring them with festivals. In Juan's artistic world, gods still stalk the earth. In Marcial's artistic world, the ancient gods are no longer present, but we must nonetheless dream them and give them an existence of another kind.

Felix is the younger brother and his style is more derivative, though he has a number of fine works. Felix Jimenez, a cousin, is the second most conceptual and experimental painter of the group, after Marcial; he lives in San Miguel Allende rather than in San Augustin. Some of Felix's best works portray very large female figures juxtaposed with very small male figures. Inocencio Chino and Roberto Mauricio, two other cousins, have painted quality works as well. Inocencio lives near Felix Jimenez and Roberto Mauricio splits his time between painting amate and playing in a mariachi band.

About thirty years ago, the painters made their first impact on the art world. Rabkin introduced the works to Selden Rodman, the well-known writer on folk and Naïve art, and their reputation quickly spread. Mr. and Mrs. Maurice C. Thompson, who have perhaps the best private collection of Haitian art in the United States, bought numerous paintings. Selden Rodman proclaimed that the tradition would turn out to be no less important than the Naïve Art of Haiti , and he featured the painters prominently in his book *Artists in Tune With Their World* . Rabkin opened a Santa Fe gallery, called Galeria Lara, devoted largely to works from the region.

All of the brothers maintain homes in San Agustin, although they spend much of their time in other locales for commercial reasons. The population of San Agustin has become increasingly itinerant, as individuals leave during the winter months to look for work elsewhere, returning to till the fields in the summer and fall.

The Rio Balsas Nahua community will not last forever. Over ten years ago the Mexican government had plans to build a dam that would have inundated most of the villages and required forcible removal of the inhabitants. The plans were called off, in part because of well-organized local protests, and Marcial was one of the leaders of this movement. Anthropologist Jonathan Amith subsequently reproduced some of the resulting "protest amates" in his book *The Amate Tradition*, which remains the best introduction to the art of the region).

Local residents fear that the dam will eventually be built. Whether or not this is true, the Rio Balsas community will in any case be transformed by time. As outside opportunities become more lucrative, the community will fray. A generation ago, hardly anyone left San Agustin, but now many people leave, if only for part of the year. The culture may lose the sense of innocence and charm portrayed in many Nahua artworks, and perhaps lose its unique visual sense and perspective as well. The Rio Balsas painters are aware of this danger, and they are seeking to preserve their history and their traditions through their painting.

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